

EMPOWERMENT WORKS in the South West

Empowerment Works in community research

South West Foundation

"We asked people what they wanted and everything that was on the list has been sorted."

Oldmixon Parents' Group

Play parks, zebra crossings and a community shop – all these and more have been implemented since thirteen groups of people engaged in the South West Foundation Community Researchers training.

When the groups met up at a recent networking day they reported on how the training had enabled them to make positive changes to their own lives and the lives of the people in their communities – showing by example how empowering a small group of individuals can benefit a whole community.

Background

The South West Foundation is an independent charitable organisation that helps small community groups and those who support them. Since it started in 2003 it has invested £3 million in more than one thousand organisations, through providing grants on behalf of other funders, research, networking, supporting and promoting community development and developing training - including the Community Researcher training.

The Community Researchers training was developed as an extension of the Foundation's work with small community groups.

Jan Crawley, the Foundation's Chief Executive, said: "The tiny groups we work with reported that they were having trouble presenting issues and didn't have the concrete evidence to back up their findings. They were also unsure who they should be tackling and often found themselves banging their heads against a brick wall.

"We therefore decided, along with the Evaluation Trust, to work with community members and enable people to acquire the skills and knowledge that they needed to gather the views of their communities through the research. This gave them the evidence they needed."



The Project

The Community Researchers project ran for three years up until March 2011. During that time it directly trained thirteen groups of researchers - 118 individuals - to have a greater voice and influence in their community.

The training ran one day a week for six weeks. Tutored by Jan Crawley and five others, the participants were taught how to use basic research tools including creating questionnaires, interview techniques, ways to get people to respond and analysing data.

At the end of the course the participant's were also given an opportunity to put their presentation skills to the test when they presented their findings to local decision-makers, including councillors and representatives from housing associations.

Jan said: "For most of them it was the first ever time they had made a presentation but, nervous as they were, they did a fantastic job. And some of them have been doing presentations ever since!"

Many groups on the course already had some ideas about the issues they were interested in tackling – such as the Torbay Voice disabled people's group, which looked at issues around wheelchair users and public transport. All groups engaged in the training to learn the skills they needed to gather evidence and information in order to mobilise local people and secure small amounts of funding.

Mary Edwards delivered the Community Researchers training in Torbay, East Devon and Milton, Weston-super-Mare. She was delighted with how popular and successful it became. She said: "We're really passionate about this training because it produces a difference and a change in outlook. And that leads to outcomes within the community. It's very strongly community focussed."

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Oldmixon, Weston-super-Mare

The first group to undertake the Community Researcher training was the Oldmixon Parents' Group from the Oldmixon estate in Weston-super-Mare. The training was designed and delivered in a partnership between South West Foundation, as the managing agency, the Evaluation Trust and NS Housing, who provided the venue and refreshments.

The group were trained in interview and research techniques and then went out and interviewed members of their community on local needs and concerns. They quickly found that people needed an information hub on the estate, a zebra crossing near to a main supermarket and

had concerns over the issue of a rehab hostel near to a children's play area addressed.

Once they had collected and collated this information the group presented their findings at an event attended by local councillors, representatives from NS Housing and the Government Office for the South Wes, local residents and council staff.

After their presentation the group was instantly offered the opportunity to manage an empty shop on the estate, which was owned by NS Housing. This shop would become the much sought after information hub for local residents – a place where people could have a voice and get the support they need.



South West Foundation organised a group visit to a successful community shop in Swindon on the Parks Estate and then the Oldmixon group set about refurbishing its own community base.

In June 2010 the YOU ("Young and Oldmixon Unite") shop opened, staffed by a team of volunteers from the Oldmixon Parents' Group and the Oldmixon Residents Association, and providing opportunities such as surgeries with the local councillor.

The shop made over £5,000 from the sale of second hand goods and fresh fruit and vegetables in its first six months.

Jan Crawley said: "The Community Researcher training gave them the skills and confidence to take their plans forward knowing they had the support of the community behind them. The shop became a real community project – the Community Researcher group were mainly all women but men from the estate came on board too in the designing and fitting of the shop premises."

"On the very first course with Oldmixon we added the presentation purely to practise presentation skills, but when people offered stuff on the spot we realised that the presentation was an integral part of the training and a way to instantly reach decision-makers and potential funders."

As well as benefiting their communities the new skills and confidence in writing, interviewing, recording and analysing helped the researchers in their quest for future jobs and entry to college. Two of the nine successfully applied for further education courses soon after the training.

One of the researchers said: "I've always worked in part-time jobs such as bars and cleaning jobs, but now I want a career. This course has given me the confidence to apply for college. I'm doing Health and Social Care, which will give me the equivalent of 4 A-levels. I now want to be a youth worker."

The positive impact on the community is still being felt. Members of the Oldmixon group, armed with a new confidence and voice, are now looking at further ways they can make changes happen and influence local service providers.

One participant said: "I've got lots of ideas from the research. It's about the estate. It's a community spirit coming back."

Torquay

After the success of the Oldmixon training the Community Researchers programme was rolled out across other groups in the South West. In Torquay, the training was delivered to a group of residents from the Litchfield and Pendennis housing estates, a local church and Torbay Voice disabled people's group. The research topics ranged from looking at what activities were available for younger people to issues around wheelchair users and public transport.

"Without this training I really would not have know where to start with seeking funding"

Researchers from the two estates were trained to use Flip cameras and made a short, effective film about the issues in their neighbourhood and an interview with their MP.



Some of the Torquay Community Researchers wanted to stop a green area on their estate being sold off for development. Through the training they were able to provide concrete evidence of what the community wanted, find out about funding and approach decision-makers on this subject.

As a direct result of the Community Researchers training the group successfully secured Play Builder Funding and £80,000 from Torbay Council to turn the green area into a play park.

A member of the Litchfield Residents' Association said: "Without this training I really would not have know where to start with seeking funding."

The group also compiled a questionnaire looking at what children and young people in their community wanted and the main answer was day trips off the estate. The residents from the estates have gone on to organise a whole host of outings and activities for children and young people, including a fossil-hunting trip to Lyme Regis and a day out at Crealy Adventure Park.

Jan said: "Following the presentation at Torquay the play officer from Torbay Council listened to what was said about the need for outings and activities for young people and offered the group funding for this on the spot."

Just like the group from Oldmixon, the Torquay researchers, supported by Riviera Housing Association who partnered the Foundation for their training programme, have continued to make a positive contribution to their neighbourhood and become more empowered to use their voice to influence decision-makers. They are currently working at raising £150,000 to upgrade a local skate park and recently organised another consultation day for the community.

The researchers from the two Torquay estates are now linked and hope to sit on the Neighbourhood Partnership Board together to give each other strength of voice.

Jan said: "The training enabled those who took part to

have a sense that they can bring about change and get those in power to listen if they take the right approach and find the right people to influence. They also had the right evidence to back up their claims. Agencies were delighted to have made such helpful contacts on these estates. As the play officer said: 'These residents are my new best friends.'"

South Ward, Weston-super-Mare

In South Ward, Weston-super-Mare, a group of Community Researchers undertook training to address the issues of litter on their housing estate. They found through their research that people didn't understand the term "fly tipping" and that bins were not positioned where they were needed. Both of these issues have now been addressed and their estate is a tidier place in which to live.

One of the South Ward researchers said: "We spoke to many local residents who were very helpful to us...but we also spoke to the local council and the housing association.... Our views have been put forward and things are beginning to change. They have now asked us to undertake a new survey looking at the use of our local library to make sure it is meeting local needs."

The group who undertook the training are based at The Healthy Living For All Centre in South Ward. They are now, equipped with their skills from the training, continuing to do research.

Jan said: "The Community Researchers programme has been very positive and nearly all of the researchers have gone on to do other research and continued to use their skills. Many have started new groups to continue to influence service provision in their locality.

"We feel sure they will continue to use their skills for the benefit of the community. We feel this because we have kept in contact with many of the researchers and they have gone on to do great things in their community."

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Investment

The first Community Researchers training at Oldmixon received £8,000 of Empowerment Works funding to develop and run the course. Following the success of the training extra funding was made available from the Targeted Support for Empowerment Fund for the second year, and up until March 2011.

There was also support in kind from the ten housing associations that provided venues to meet in and support costs for some of the residents.

Jan said: "We will always be grateful for the help and support of such housing associations as NS Housing and Riviera who had faith in us and their residents from the start."

Future plans

The South West Foundation is continuing to support the researchers through a newly established website, telephone support and meetings where possible. The Foundation recently took a group of almost 50 people up to Parliament; many of the group had taken part in the Community Researcher training.

As the course development funding has ended there are plans to develop it as a fee-for-service course, charging for the delivery of the training.

Jan said there has been a lot of interest in the training, particularly from housing associations, as many of the projects ran in social housing areas. She added that the training also worked well with people with health issues and service users. It was easy to see how the training could be built upon to give people the skills to take on the new Community Organiser roles.

The Healthy Living Centre at South Ward, Weston-super-Mare, is planning to set up a Social Enterprise in North Somerset based on the Community Researchers model. The plan is to use the already trained Community

Researchers to train others and also to undertake research for local authorities and other organisations.

Many of the researchers are staying in touch, supporting each other and continuing their work.

Jan said: "The Community Researcher training has become more of a movement than just one or two individuals in separate geographical areas becoming skilled in research techniques. Individuals have increased their knowledge, skills and confidence around how to influence local decisions and who to influence to bring about changes and improvements in communities.

"They are so motivated and empowered and keen to continue changing things."

Find out more

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